

VZCZCXRO9651
PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHIHL RUEHKUK
DE RUEHGB #0126/01 0170716
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 170716Z JAN 09
FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1267
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000126

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/16/2019

TAGS: PREL PGOV IZ

SUBJECT: THE IRAQI SPEAKER'S RACE: FEWER CANDIDATES AND HIGHER STAKES

REF: A. 08 BAGHDAD 4007

IB. 08 BAGHDAD 4019

IC. 08 BAGHDAD 4030

Classified By: Robert Ford for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

I1. SUMMARY (C) Tawafuq, the principal Sunni Arab bloc in parliament, has presented Ayad al Samaraie, leader of the Iraqi Islamic Party's (IIP) parliamentary caucus, as its candidate for speaker of the Council of Representatives. Rival Sunni blocs, and some Shi'a parliamentarians, insist that the position must not go to a member of the IIP. The cast of contenders has dropped from almost 20 at its highest point to about five or six. Samaraie's strongest contender is emerging as Abid Mutlak al Jeboori, a Sunni Arab parliamentarian from Iraqi Arab Independents (IAI). There are widespread rumors that Prime Minister Maliki also opposes an IIP Speakership, as he is thought to view the Islamic Party as an adversary. (ISCI, the major Shi'a party, and the Kurds appear to be lining up behind Samaraie, while Maliki's Dawa, Sadrist and harder line Sunni Arabs are lining up behind Abid Mutlak. The process is a secret ballot, and one MP has plausibly predicted two ballots, spaced two or three days apart. Two dark horses remain: Hachem al Hassani and recently deposed speaker Mahmoud Mashhadani. The former appears to be a plausible second choice, and the latter as a spoiler. How this race turns out could affect Maliki's own political future - Maliki's perceived intervention against Samarrai'e could trigger a dump-Maliki drive in the parliament. In addition, if the Sunni Arab hardliners feel cheated, they might ratchet up rhetoric against the political process in the run-up to national elections at the end of 2009. END SUMMARY

I2. (C) Leaders of the Tawafuq ("Accord") Front, the Sunni Arab parliamentary bloc, insist that the next speaker must be drawn from their ranks, per reftel. Many non-IIP Sunnis, however, adamantly insisted to poloffs during the past week that the IIP won't get the speaker's position. Hussain al Falluji (Former IPC/Former Tawafuq), Hewar MPs Nada Ibrahim, Omar al Jeboori and Ali al Sajari (Hewar), Abdullah Iskander al Jeboori (Al Watan), NDC MPs Khalaf al Alyan, Hassan Deghan, Wathab Shakir, Omar al Jeboori (IFND - Hewar) have all claimed that the IIP should not hold all the principal Sunni-designated leadership positions in the GOI. (Comment: these are among the most anti-government and old-style Arab nationalist elements in the Iraqi parliament. End Comment.)

THE CONTENDERS

I3. (C) Tawafuq/IIP have settled on their candidate, Ayad al Samaraie, who may be the favorite to win the position. Non-IIP Sunnis, however, are still debating among themselves. Although the field at one point reached almost 20 possible candidates, it has been winnowed to five or six. Remaining are Abid Mutlak al Jeboori (IAI), Mohammed Tamim (aka Mohamed Hussain al Jeboori - Hewar), Maysoon Damluji (Iraqiyya, and a female MP), Osama Najaifi (Iraqiyya). Many parliament members believe that PM Maliki also opposes an IIP Speakership and is

tacitly backing Abid Mutlak. Samarraie told us January 13 that Maliki is quietly but clearly encouraging opposition to any IIP candidate for the Speakership.

¶4. (C) Samarraie's strongest opponent appears to be Abid Mutlak, leader of the Iraqi Arab Independents bloc (IAI). He is drawing strong support from non-IIP Sunni Arabs, especially from Hewar, the IAI, some Iraqiyya, and the NDC (although the NDC members indicate that they will also promote a candidate for at least the first ballot). Of the remaining candidates, Mohammed Tamim has been dismissed as a remaining candidate, Mohammed Tamim has been dismissed as too young and inexperienced. Moreover, the Kurdish politicians don't like Tamim who has clashed with them repeatedly over his native Kirkuk. Maysoon Damluji, meanwhile has been dismissed because she is a woman. Given that a Kurdish MP requested that Osama Najaifi's parliamentary membership be terminated for spreading lies and rumors about the Kurds, it is unlikely that Najaifi could gain Kurdish support.

THE ALLIANCES

¶5. (C) While a week ago, the Kurds and Shi'a were generally silent on possible candidates, they are now beginning to express preferences. Based on poloffs' numerous conversations with Shi'a and Kurdish MPs, it appears that Ayad al Samarraie has the backing of ISCI and the Kurds. Samarraie himself informed PMIN that there was an agreement stemming from the Mashhadani ouster in which ISCI (approx. 30) and the Kurdish Alliance (approx. 58) would support a Tawafuq speaker (i.e. IIP). Samarraie believes that both groups will honor the

BAGHDAD 00000126 002 OF 002

agreement. He and Saifaldin Abdulrahman, senior advisor to Tariq al Hashimi, estimated (somewhat optimistically) that there were 30 members remaining in Tawafuq, which gives Samarraie a base of approximately 110-115 votes. (Comment: a total of 138 votes is needed to win. End Comment.)

¶6. (C) Abid Mutlak, however, also appears to have the backing of other groups in parliament including Dawa (12) and Dawa Tanzim (13), according to Abdulhadi al Hassani (Dawa Tanzim). Based on reports from other MPs such as Omar al Jaboori (Arab Independents), Abid Mutlak may also draw the backing of the ever-amorphous Parliamentary Coordination Group (PCG), formerly the July 22nd group, whose Shi'a membership from Fadhila, Sadrist, and Arab independents accounts for about 50 votes. When including the non-IIP Sunnis, approximately 35 MPs, Abid Mutlak may have a base of about 105 votes.

THE PROCESS

¶7. (C) Almost all MP interlocutors agree that they have until Saturday, January 17 to settle the issue. According to Parliament's bylaws, the vote must be by secret ballot and Abdullah Iskander (Al Watan) projected two ballots. On the first, he predicted that Samarraie and Abid Mutlak would win a significant, but insufficient plurality. All other candidates would then drop out, leading to a second ballot, perhaps two or three days later, in which Samarraie and Abid Mutlak would compete for the required 138 votes. This process was confirmed by Alex Terchanian, former Speaker Mahmoud Mashhadani's chief of staff.

COMMENT

¶8. (C) Despite these complicated machinations, the bottom line is that there are two frontrunners: Ayad Samarraie, the mainstream Sunni candidate, and Abid Mutlak al-Jeboori, the favorite of the breakaway Sunnis. There is scope in the possible 2 to 3 day intermission, however, for these two camps to cancel each other out, clearing the field for one of

the darkhorses. In addition, Maliki's perceived support for Abid Mutlak could backfire, and work in Samarraie's favor, given the depth of anti-Maliki sentiment in the parliament. It might even encourage the Kurds, ISCI and the Islamic Party to drive to a vote a no-confidence motion against Maliki.

¶9. (C) Significantly, despite earlier talk, all indications are that the final choice for Speaker will indeed be a Sunni Arab. However, if the process moves in such a way that the harder-line Sunni Arabs feel cheated, it is possible that they would ratchet up their rhetoric against the Kurds, ISCI and the Islamic Party and against the political process in general. They likely would perceive short-term electoral gain in such a move in the run-up to the parliamentary elections at the end of 2009. End Comment.

BUTENIS